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ABSTRACT

As interest on the part of federal and state agencies increases, and legislation is enacted to prevent consumer abuse in higher education, institutions must recognize that students, as well as taxpapers, are consumers of higher education, and that the educational marketplace must concern itself with fair practices, much as business and industry have done in the past several years. The first section of this paper is a philosophical overview of the effect of consumerism in the community college. Some reasons for the development of consumer problems in community colleges are outlined, and a rationale for committing institutional resources to deal with them is given. The second and third sections deal with constructive suggestions of student affairs specialists at two community colleges (one rural and one urban institution) for facing the problems that consumerism presents to post-secondary education. Focuses include: the need for quick action; the need to gather accurate, relevant, and useful data concerning job descriptions and future job opportunities; the need to present both positive and negative information about the college facilities and atmosphere; and the need to explore various means of dispersing such information to interested members of the community. (Author/NHM)

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CONSUMERISM COMES TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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CONSUMERISM COMES TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

This Topical Paper has been prepared by three individuals who are associated with publicly supported community colleges in different capacities. All the writers and their institutions are closely associated with a common issue--the increasing and, sometimes, frustrating problem of consumerism as it encroaches upon the once "sacred" halls of higher education. As interest on the part of federal and state agencies increases and legislation is enacted to prevent consumer abuse in higher education, institutions are literally being forced to recognize that students, as well as taxpayers, are consumers of higher education and that the educational marketplace must concern itself with fair practices, much as business and industry has done in the past several years.

Even though the consumer protection movement associated with American products and advertising has been somewhat overexposed, it is new to educators, who have been concentrating on a myriad of other problems. Since most administrators within postsecondary institutions are just now feeling the effects of recent investigations and subsequent legislation, the first section of the paper is a philosophical overview. The author outlines some reasons for the development of consumer problems in community colleges and gives a rationale for committing institutional resources to deal with them.

The remaining presentations, written by two student affairs specialists, provide some contructive suggestions that may assist other institutions as they begin to face consumerism in postsecondary education.

Each institution represented is participating in a National Project I grant entitled "Better Information for Student Choice" under the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. The major focus of the grant is to allow potentially pace-setting agencies and postsecondary institutions to develop standards for improving the quality of information provided to prospective students. The plans presented here are in the developmental stage and will continue to evolve as higher education becomes more fully acquainted with the many aspects of the consumer problem.

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF CONSUMERISM

George B. Vaughan

Sears, Roebuck and Company recently finished rewriting its 1976 spring-summer catalog. Missing from the new version are many adjectives and claims that in the past promised consumers much but told them little about the quality or performance of a product. One illustration will demonstrate what type of rewriting the seventy-five copywriters did in the three years it took them to complete their task. The description of a house paint in the 1975 version of the catalog states that the paint "Won't yellow" and that there is "No chalk washdown." It further points out that the paint has "exceptional durability to fight summer's broiling heat and winter's icy blasts." The new version qualifies the guarantee by claiming that the paint will be "Nonyellowing for five years" and that there will be "No chalk washdown for five years." It states simply that the paint is "climate-formulated to withstand summer and winter." (Italics mine.)

What does the Sears catalog have to do with community college education? A great deal if one views it as symbolic of the current need to provide better information for consumer choice and to present straightforward copy that avoids the adjective overload of the past.

Let us contrast the Sears rewrite with current advertisements used by some public community colleges (Bender, 1975). One ad states

that if you "WANT TO EARN $'S IN YOUR CAREER YEARS" you can do so by going to college. It further asserts that the college's programs "prepare you to make immediate entry into business or industry at a high starting salary" (p. 35). As Bender points out, the use of the dollar sign is misleading and the claims of immediate entry into the job market and the earning of high salaries are frequently unsupportable and therefore misleading. One advertisement is directed at veterans, telling them that by enrolling in college they can "SHAKE THE MONEY TREE." Although Bender gives other examples, these alone indicate that we in the public community colleges should be lining up our own copywriters in order to bring our catalogs, brochures, and advertisements in line with consumer demands.

Most community colleges probably do not intend to defraud or mislead students. Yet there are several internal and external factors that push us toward using a hard-sell approach. If the battles of recruitment have caused some colleges to be less than candid--and many institutions are--how did we get ourselves into this situation? There appear to be several reasons why we are now walking the tightrope of consumerism.

- Higher enrollments mean larger budgets. If the two-year college is to serve its target population adequately, it must sustain an enrollment that will ensure adequate funding. As the birth rate declines and competition for students increases, this part of the tightrope act becomes more and more difficult to perform.

- The public community colleges have played the major role in the democratization movement in higher education that has taken place since the end of World War II. But this process has exacted a price. As students exercised their choice to attend college in the free-enterprise atmosphere of American society, they frequently made unwise decisions. The result has often been to waste the resources of our young people (and society) in our attempts to better serve them through enrolling them in the community colleges. While supporting the students' "right to fail," we should recognize that many enter the community college's open door ill prepared to make the wise career choices that would allow them to succeed. We must give them more than the alternative to attend or not to attend college; we must provide them with adequate information so that they not only select the appropriate institution but also increase their chances for success.
- Another aspect of the democratization process has been the demand, created in part by the community colleges themselves, for educational opportunities for the masses. Minorities, members of lower socioeconomic groups, and other segments of society have come to expect more educational programs tailored to their specific needs. Some colleges have, as a result of these new demands, often found themselves trying to be too many things to too many people.
- During much of the past quarter of a century, community colleges

have tended to be the "fair-haired boys" of state legislatures and other funding agencies. As a result, they have been supported generously but have been allowed to develop and operate almost unchecked in some instances. For example, they have instituted programs without adequate planning and with little or no consideration for the future of the graduates.

- Lastly, many of us associated with the community college movement nationally and locally have recruited students with a missionary zeal based on the belief that if we can enroll them we can "save" them. The high attrition rate of our students suggests that we are not "saving them" as well as we are recruiting them.

Each of these factors affects attempts to "package" our services in a more candid and useful fashion. And there are other agents demanding that public community colleges, along with other segments of higher education, get their houses in order. The first of these external forces is the federal government, which is increasing its monitoring of higher education. In relationship to the consumer issue, "Congress is showing an increasing interest in protecting the consumers of post-high school education, although few specific proposals have yet been put forward" (Semas, 1975, p. 1).

State legislative study commissions are also demanding to know more and more about such things as enrollments, job placement, and student success in community colleges. This information is being shared with the taxpayers, who therefore are better able to ascertain

whether they are getting their money's worth.

And finally, more students are demanding that they get what they "contract for" when they decide to enroll in a college. This movement, though not new, is manifesting itself increasingly in the form of suits against institutions that fail to live up to their stated commitments.

Is there anything we in the public community colleges can do to cope rationally with the new challenges of consumerism? Are we to go along with inadequate and unfair refund policies and other procedures? Will we continue to make lavish promises in regard to job placement, training and salaries when, in fact, we are not performing as we say we are? Or are we to sit back and wait for such things as the "Buckley Amendment" regarding students' rights to see confidential files and the recent veterans' regulations which tend to force many institutions to commit flagrant violations of the rules. If we act now, knowledgeable people in the colleges rather than congressional committees and bureaucrats can make decisions that will guide our futures. We might consider several things:

- There are two groups of consumers of higher education: the student and society. We need to be sensitive to both groups.
- We need to acknowledge that we have made mistakes and have ignored certain needs for reform. If the tax dollar is to be used to "buy education," as has been and is being done, society has a right to certain expectations. For example, our refund

policies have often worked to the advantage of the institution rather than the student and the taxpayers. On the other hand, students have been able to receive veteran's benefits, social security benefits, and other tax financed benefits without showing adequate academic progress.

- We should examine some of our basic philosophical beliefs and determine if conflicts exist between institutional policies and federal and state laws. If so, we need to take our stand rather than accept all federal and state regulations without question. For instance, the new regulations issued by the Veterans Administration discourage nonpunitive grading by pressuring institutions to discontinue the liberal use of withdrawals. We must ask whether nonpunitive grading is worth fighting for, and if it is, we should make our views known and challenge the VA's ruling. The point is that we in higher education should be making or at least influencing decisions affecting educational policy instead of fighting the brush fires of compliance.

Yet we cannot be free from outside pressures. In this situation we must abandon defensiveness and be willing and able to explain our position.

As one considers these issues, one fact should emerge: few, if any, colleges are immune to the effects of consumerism. Though perhaps the analogy is overdrawn, one writer makes a strong case for our being more sensitive to the college's role in relation to the consumer. El-Khawas states that "college catalogs are seen as a form of

institutional advertising, admissions counselors are seen as salesmen, and a student's formal registration as a contractual agreement between buyer and seller" (1975, p. 126). Another educator makes this point: "Though we academics tend to see ourselves primarily as consumers, by others we are seen...as the managers of one of the country's largest businesses, and we must, therefore, like other owners and managers, stand before the bar of public accountability; consumerism allows of no exceptions" (Weisinger, 1975, p. 586).

If we are not immune, we should better prepare to serve the consumer. And if the individual institution is to prepare, we must have some guidelines. Some ways to develop guidelines are outlined in the next sections of this paper, along with some suggestions on how to present the material. Both rural and urban settings are considered.

First, however, I would like to suggest some reasons why an individual college as well as higher education in general should devote time and energy to developing a propaganda-free approach to consumers.

The primary reason is that it is staffed by professional people who have an obligation to present prospective students with as much accurate information as possible and to live up to the college's stated policies. Armed with this information, students and parents of students should be able to make a decision about a particular college based on facts and not promises. Most colleges should provide more consumer protection than they have in the past.

The changing legal position of students is another reason. Students are now recognized as consumers, and the courts are hearing cases based on their consumer complaints. If we know the facts, we can better present them and avoid being called into court to defend false claims. And if we do go to court on a consumer complaint, having the facts will help our case.

Next, as the consumer movement becomes widespread in higher education, each college will need to know more about other postsecondary education opportunities and be able to better advise students which institution they should attend. Knowing about other colleges means more than being familiar with what is in their catalogs. It means knowing such things as their dropout rate, job-placement record, what types of financial aid they have available, and other information that will allow students to make better choices. If we have a more accurate picture of other institutions, it should be easier to resist the temptation to enroll students in our own institution, whether we have a program for them or not. Incidentally, this approach will promote professionalism and perhaps lessen the chance of legal action against the college.

Finally, and this could prove to be the most valuable result of providing better information for student choice, the institution will get to know itself better. As Stark (1975) puts it, "The process of self-examination for the benefit of the customer can increase credibility at the same time that institutions are improved. The consumer

movement is just one more stimulus toward fiscal and educational accountability." She points out that many students want to know in advance what type of education they will receive at a given institution. They want printed course objectives and statements on how they will be graded.

As I implied above, getting to know an institution means more than simply being aware of its enrollment and curricula. It means having a public information program that keeps people informed as well as promotes the college; it means knowing what happens to students once they arrive on campus and thus it means providing information for those already enrolled as well as for prospective students; it means presenting students with various career choices even <u>after</u> they have enrolled (most students do not choose a career at the same time they select a college). We need to extricate ourselves from the unfortunate position where we continue to enroll majors in history, English, and education who are unaware of the limited prospects for employment upon graduation. We must tell veterans what is expected and what is likely to happen to their benefits if they fail to comply with established guidelines. In short, when we know our institution and present information in a manner that is clear, candid, and adequate for the decision making process, we will have taken a major step toward being able to tell the consumer some of the things we can guarantee about our educational programs.

If we consider these points and take action when needed, con-

sumerism should not threaten our public community colleges; instead it should present all of higher education with an opportunity to better serve its two consumer constituencies. "Consumerism is not a limited effort focused on only certain abuses or types of institutions. Rather, it poses a dual challenge to all postsecondary institutions, questioning...first whether (administrations) have been sufficiently sensitive to the needs of prospective students for fair, accurate, and complete information and second (whether) institutions have made available to enrolled students the educational program that was described and tacitly promised to applicants" (El-Khawas, 1975, p. 29). Walking the tightrope of consumerism will become less of a threat once the college becomes more sensitive to the needs of the student and begins to incorporate better consumer information as an integral part of both short- and long-range planning.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGES RESPOND TO CONSUMERISM

Bonnie Elosser

In an effort to ward off the increasing consumer problems, the federal government, after considerable investigation, found it necessary to establish and begin to enforce rules and regulations that would protect the consumer of higher education. Some state legislatures also have enacted laws (particularly regarding proprietary schools) to help alleviate abuses. The Federal Trade Commission developed regulations concerning the advertising, disclosure, cooling off, and refund policies of proprietary, vocational, and home study schools. And while most educators feel that both federal and state legislation are beginning to force postsecondary institutions to eliminate undesirable practices, and though most of these same educators tend to endorse the concepts and intent embodied in the legislation and subsequent regulations, it is becoming increasingly evident that those regulations developed by individuals far removed from the educational community are often not compatible with the framework and operating procedures in educational institutions. The Buckley Amendment, for example, was certainly a positive step toward preventing misuse of student records, yet college admissions officers across the nation were unable to cope with some of its aspects. It ultimately had to be changed on the basis of recommendations made by those who were close to the source of the problem and who would

ultimately enforce the law.

Perhaps the critical point often overlooked in most discussions of consumer protection for students is that the most effective job of policing can and should be initiated and carried out by the institutions themselves. Had we educators been sensitive to the consequences of releasing information on students, we could have devised a workable but much less restrictive plan to protect student records effectively. Institutional policymakers and those who actually implement such policies should be the ones to devise and carry out consumer protection programs in postsecondary education. If, however, we at the institutional level are unwilling to assume this responsibility, then we can hardly express dismay every time a new regulation that is ill-suited to our needs and seemingly impossible to enforce crosses our desks.

As Vaughan mentioned earlier, Congress is showing increased interest in protecting student consumers, although few specific proposals have yet been put forward. Interest, however, is obviously not enough, and the challenge facing the community college is to develop those specific proposals. The pertinent question then is, How can community colleges devise positive ways of dealing with the difficult but not insurmountable task of providing adequate consumer protection for students and in the process ward off much of the rigid and ill-suited legislation that will inevitably come from outside sources if we do not act? It is highly desirable that we respond in

such a way that we do not unduly compromise the flexible and innovative approach which has made our institutions highly successful.

The first positive step, of necessity, is to act quickly. Top-level administrators (presidents, deans, division chairmen) must take time to acquaint themselves with the new legislation, much of which is at the heart of institutional philosophy. They must see that institutional policy is brought in line with federal and state regulations and make sure that these regulations are understood and enforced at the appropriate levels in the college. Should these administrators feel that the federal guidelines are incompatible with the goals of the institution or are unfair, then it is their obligation to try to modify them. Some of the ill-designed legislation and regulations merely slipped into existence throughout the nation because those in a position to exert influence were uninformed concerning the basic issues. The tragedy is that we tend to lose much of the diversity in American postsecondary education if we do not study the legislation carefully and make the problems unique to our particular institutions known to appropriate agencies before the legislation is written.

Most educators close to the issue know, however, that recently developed legislation was enacted to prevent flagrant consumer abuses. What is really needed now, in addition to immediate compliance or expressions of disapproval, is positive action by the colleges to help the students in ways that are more subtle but nonetheless significant.

During the 1974-75 academic year the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, in its National Project I guidelines, challenged institutions to gather and disseminate the kinds of information that can effect a better match between students and institutions. The task was to provide prospective students not with glowing accounts and promises often unfulfilled but with specific data suited to the needs of the various target groups who might attend the institution. The three community colleges that received grants from the Fund under the "Better Information for Student Choice" guidelines are presently developing creative ways to help student consumers make better selections. These improved choices will increase their success and in turn will give taxpayers a better return on their dollars invested in higher education.

One of these colleges was Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. It is one of more than five hundred small, rural postsecondary institutions in the nation and offers courses and programs extending through the first two years of college. At present, the college is attempting to devise creative ways to go beyond reacting to new legislation. The institution is committed to seeing that the student consumer receives information that is highly accurate even if it is not always glowing. The college is implementing a proposal which will, we hope, let the consumer know what the institution is and, perhaps even more important, what it is not. Though the following suggestions are tailored somewhat to a small, rural community college,

many of the ideas could with slight modification meet the needs of many institutions.

We are all caught up in the recruitment race that forces institutions to emphasize attractive physical factors to the exclusion of more pertinent information. Recent high school graduates are often disillusioned when they enroll and find themselves among students who are married, often with families, outside responsibilities, and jobs. Students need to know the kind of life style they will encounter once they arrive. The fact that the average age of students on many community college campuses is high provides advantages which should be made known. Multigenerational classes may well be a significant plus factor at community colleges; students can benefit from the diversity in age and background found in most classes.

Most community college administrators are horrified at the prospect of publishing attrition rates; yet this is important information for a student who is asking "What is likely to happen to me if I enroll in a certain program at your institution?" We can publish the data and explain why attrition rates tend to be high, emphasizing the fact that many students leave their programs to take good positions or to attend other institutions.

The second major task of the community college attempting to present a realistic picture would be to find out more about what happens to the students when they leave the institution. Rural service areas are frequently populated with persons who have a strong

desire to become educated and work close to home. Yet in many of these same areas the data show that the outgoing migration rate of high school seniors is sometimes as high as 70 percent. One major step that a college serving a locale like this can take is to gather specific information about local employment opportunities for students who enter and complete occupational-technical programs. The new Guaranteed Student Loan Regulations are forcing us in this direction when they state:

> "In the case of an institution having a course or courses of study, the purpose of which is to prepare students for a particular vocation, trade or career field, such statement shall include information regarding the employment of students enrolled in such courses, in such vocation, trade or career field. Such information shall include data regarding the average starting salary for previously enrolled students entering positions of employment for which the courses of study offered by the institution are intended as preparation and the percentage of such students who obtained employment in such positions. This information shall be based on the most recently available data. If the institution, after reasonable effort, cannot obtain statistically meaningful data regarding its own students, it may use the most recent comparable regional or national data" (Federal Register, 1975, p. 7596).

Few educators would deny that the prospective student should have this kind of information, yet many institutions are taking advantage of the loophole offered in the last sentence and providing only national data. National trends, however, have little significance in secluded rural areas with unique economic problems. Community colleges that serve rural areas need to begin by tapping and utilizing local data such as that collected by local planning districts, local development authorities, various industries and companies, curriculum advisory committees, and urban-rural renewal programs. Information received from these local sources can provide answers to student questions that catalogs, brochures, and recruiters have either neglected altogether or glossed over with general or misleading statements. One does not have to spend much time with prospective students or read very extensively to know that most students are extremely concerned about whether they will be employed when they complete their programs.

But prospective students need more information than just what jobs will be available and where. People making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives are entitled to much more than federal law now dictates. Therefore, institutions that are really interested in the long-range success of their graduates might work toward providing a comprehensive job listing which includes the following items:

1. Detailed job descriptions--average entry-level salaries; average salaries and salary ranges after two years on the

job; and average salaries and salary ranges after five years on the job.

2. Opportunities for advancement based on the career-ladder concept--specified requirements for advancement. How rapidly will advancement occur? How far can one advance in various types of positions?
3. Opportunities, for example, for individuals with an associate degree as compared with those with no postsecondary educational experience (follow-up studies on each group should be made).
4. Minimum educational requirements for job entry.
5. Desired educational requirements for advancement.
6. Educational opportunities available in the area for both job-entry training and skill improvements.
7. General aptitude requirements for getting and keeping a job. Studies should be made to determine how people feel about their jobs. What are the retention rates in various types of positions? Detailed information concerning work hours, vacation and leave time, the types of offices, the types of supervision involved, and so on, should be available.
8. Life styles on the job.
9. Long-range projections for continued and future employment--job forecasts for the next five years.
10. Mobility factor associated with the job.

11. Employers' attitudes--toward inservice education, toward people with degrees, toward older people entering the job market.

12. History of unemployment periods.

13. Local, regional, state, and national outlook for the job.

In addition to giving students detailed job information, we need to tell them what certain careers entail and demand. High school girls envision nursing as a glamorous profession where they may meet and fall in love with handsome doctors and make up a bed or two on the side, whereas in reality nursing is somewhat less glamorous than television programs lead viewers to believe. Community colleges can provide prospective and currently enrolled students with accurate career profiles. Audiovisual presentations on each career field offered at the institution can be prepared and distributed on the campus, at local libraries, and at high schools throughout the service areas. In a rural area where varied career models are not abundant, these factual pictures can contribute a great deal to helping a student select an appropriate institution and program.

Students who enter the university-parallel program, like the students who enter the occupational-technical programs, require accurate information but often of a different nature. Many of these students select the transfer courses because they are not interested in any of the occupational programs offered by the college but they really do not know specifically what they want to major in or where they want to

go. The lack of career models in a rural area affects these students as well. They tend to think that most people who attend a four-year institution are teachers or go on to become doctors or lawyers. They are not aware of the multitude of career options open to four-year-college graduates. Most of the information these students receive comes from faculty advisors and counselors and is designed to help them choose a transfer institution and select the courses that will facilitate the transfer.

All too often we fail to devote a great deal of time and energy to transfer students and are concerned even less about their future employability. Perhaps we have this attitude because we think that placing them is really the responsibility of their four-year institutions. But the community college is extremely well suited to giving transfer students the kind of information that would help them avoid "drifting into majors" with very little background information once they transfer. Students should be made aware of majors at four-year institutions that will lead to employment, and they can be directed toward institutions which have made an effort to employ their graduates. Counselors at community colleges should begin to probe and find out what transfer institutions have good placement records.

Finally, even if we develop the mechanisms for continuously gathering accurate, relevant, and useful data, the institutional staff can never reach enough people to have a sizeable impact. As the information is gathered, it can be made available to public infor-

mation coordinators, recruiters, faculty and staff members, and all those who speak on behalf of the college. But the information will also have to be packaged and delivered in such a way that it will reach and affect prospective students, currently enrolled students and their parents, and the general public. A college cannot publish pages and pages of raw data; they must be interpreted. And then good copy must be written that will attract and maintain the attention of various target groups throughout the service area. For instance, elderly people interested in taking a special interest course should not be expected to sift through pages of employment information intended for students entering the occupational-technical fields. Each institution will have individuals who know the area and its people to develop a well-integrated information program. Those who coordinate such programs will also have to know how to relay timely information to the appropriate people in language meaningful to them.

Time alone will tell what turn the consumer movement in higher education will take and what ultimate effect it will have. But one thing is certain--institutions that accept federal dollars will be affected by the movement whether they like it or not. These colleges have choices. They can become overly defensive, ignore or resist the regulations, and ultimately face serious compliance audit exceptions. Or they can comply strictly with the law without really knowing or caring what its implications are. The wisest will face the fact that institutional negligence is at least partly responsible for numerous

consumer complaints and will seize upon the opportunity to do more for students than they have done in the past. The community colleges that take a positive attitude toward the movement to protect and assist student consumers are likely to attract the students they are best equipped and designed to help and will eventually be higher quality institutions producing better satisfied students with brighter futures. Ernest Boyer stated: "As the world becomes more complicated, as the amount of information increases, as the problem of getting jobs and the nature of those jobs becomes more complex, and questions of survival become more intense, education will matter as much and more than it does today" ("Is College Necessary?", 1975, p. 37).

Since education for many is inexorably linked to survival in our increasingly complex society, it makes sense that more accurate information about which type is best suited to the individual is important. If so, we should willingly and enthusiastically search for creative means and commit institutional resources to ensure that the student and the taxpayer, who are both purchasing a major service, get their money's worth.

DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL PROSPECTUS

R. Thomas Flynn

Monroe Community College (New York) is an example of a city-based institution with a rapid rate of growth. During such growth, many assumptions regarding the information needs of the community about the college have been made based upon the questions asked most frequently by members of the community. However, these assumptions have not produced a coordinated public information program that adequately explains to the community the total concept behind this emerging institution.

Few community colleges can claim that they have not experienced image problems as they become established within their communities. This may be especially true in a sophisticated urban setting where the role of the community college is not clearly understood, and where four-year colleges and universities often receive more attention than their two-year counterparts. Due to such factors, community colleges are compelled to re-examine the information they provide to the community, although this effort will require a great deal of time and expense.

A college's responsibility to its students does not begin when they are accepted but when they are still searching for the best place to spend their academic lives. Prospective students have the right to assume that the information presented by the college is accurate and complete with weaknesses as well as strengths. Besides helping the

students determine whether the college matches their interest, abilities, and career goals, the information should also point out possible reasons for not attending the institution. Some aspects may be considered negative by some and positive by others. For example, the fact that a two-year commuter college offers a quality education but does not have fraternities, sororities, or some other social activities characteristic of resident four-year colleges may be discouraging to someone who desires the "total" college experience. However, for a person who is interested primarily in a good education at a reasonable price while living at home, such information may be viewed in a positive light.

Students are well aware that many college graduates are out of work and many are employed in fields other than those for which they were prepared. They have a right to know not only what their chances are for successfully completing their degree, but also how their degree will benefit them once they leave the institution. Such information should be provided by the institution in its early information to prospective students.

The failure of colleges to adequately inform students of the rigors of academic life and the nature of particular programs contributes to the frequency of curriculum changes and withdrawals. Although some moving around is obviously necessary as students try out different career goals, much exploration could be eliminated if prospective students had a more accurate picture of their chosen programs before they

enrolled. In fact, most changes and withdrawals are not due to academic failure but to the student's discovery that the curriculum or program was "not what I thought it would be like."

As institutions investigate their own need to develop a better information base, they will most likely find that they share common problems with most two-year colleges while having a few unique difficulties. The following are some misunderstandings and gaps found by Monroe Community College as it examined its information system.

- The "open-door policy" was not understood by current students, let alone prospective students or other members of the community. An obvious misconception was that because any high school graduate could enroll in the college, he could also enroll in any program.
- No one appeared to know very much about why the attrition rates of M.C.C. (or any other community college) differed from those of four-year institutions.
- The public had an inaccurate image of the college because it was not aware of the quality and diversity of the different educational programs.
- Printed descriptions of the college did not adequately reflect the diversity of the students and their ability levels; as a result, many members of the community assumed that M.C.C. students were drop-outs from other colleges or students who could not qualify for four-year schools.

- Information given to the public did not completely explode the myth that only recent high school graduates could succeed in college.
- Prospective students were not informed regarding the transferability of their credits to four-year institutions or their opportunities for employment when they graduated from the college.

Once an institution recognizes these kinds of problems, it must commit appropriate institutional resources to develop new ways of providing "Better Information for Student Choice."

The diverse population served by the typical urban community college requires that diverse approaches be used to present information to these service groups. The objective should be a comprehensive information package in which each piece reinforces and compliments the others.

Though most community colleges have relied on their catalog to present information to prospective students, a few have used other approaches such as college viewbooks, minicatalogs, student handbooks, and various programmatic pamphlets. Yet despite their admirable variety, all these modes rely on the printed word. An audiovisual presentation in the form of slide-tape cassettes would be an effective addition to the information package, especially for a student population that varies widely in ability and is frequently more visually than verbally oriented. In addition, the cassettes would be more stimulating and visually appealing than written materials, and therefore the information would be more easily

absorbed and retained.

The "Educational Prospectus" is defined as all the information the institution provides to prospective students about itself. The development of the Educational Prospectus first requires that the college find out what prospective students and other members of the community want to know. This requirement can be fulfilled by a survey which asks the various groups to identify and rank their informational needs. Those surveyed should include high school seniors, high school guidance counselors, parents of high school seniors and current college students, alumni, faculty and administrators. Through a preliminary investigation, the types of questions that have to be examined will be identified. Most likely, those questions will include:

"What is likely to happen to me if I come to your institution?"

"What percentage of the students graduate from the programs in which they are initially enrolled?"

"What are my chances of finding a job locally if I enroll in a career program?"

"Will all of my courses transfer to a four-year institution?"

"What are some of the reasons for which I should consider attending another college?"

At Monroe Community College the final survey included ninety questions, such as:

1. Who attends the college?

2. What programs does the college offer and how good are they, according to students and graduates?
3. Is the college merely an extension of high school?
4. What, according to students, is the social life at the college?
5. How do students and graduates rate the quality of the faculty?
6. Can students succeed at the college if they are working?

Each person surveyed was asked to rate both the importance (high, medium, low, none) and present availability (in college catalog, for example) of the information called for by each question. Space was also provided for respondents to write in additional questions which they considered important. The results were analyzed by computer in order to identify those types of information considered to have "high importance" and "low availability." Since the survey also collected a large quantity of demographic data about the respondents, it was possible to analyze the responses by group (seniors, parents, M.C.C. alumni, and so on), by ethnic group, by sex, and by other subgroupings, as well as by total responses to each question.

After reviewing the results of the survey, the investigators tried to determine whether a multifaceted approach was still the most appropriate. They recognized that colleges have traditionally used the college catalog for distributing all information to prospective students. Also, viewbooks and minicatalogs had been shown to be

successful. However, they questioned whether any institutions had attempted or been successful with using slide-tape cassette presentations. The survey results convinced them that to meet the information needs of the diverse community, the Educational Prospectus should include such an audiovisual package.

The college's next project was to collect the information that answered the questions rated most important. The following methods were used to gather these data:

1. Questionnaires were distributed to:
   a. M.C.C. students in various curriculum areas
   b. M.C.C. alumni, faculty members, and administrators
   c. area employers who had hired M.C.C. students
   d. M.C.C. students who had transferred to four-year schools
2. Interviews were conducted with M.C.C. students, faculty, and administrators and with area employers. The interviews were handled by M.C.C. students trained in market research techniques.
3. Existing college records on such points as the percentage of M.C.C. graduates who received financial aid were consulted.

Most of the information was collected directly from M.C.C. students themselves, since they were best qualified to offer opinions on such high-priority topics as the social life at the college, the quality of the faculty, and the content and demands of various programs.

The college decided to create seven short (ten to fifteen minutes) slide-tape cassette programs. One would present an overview of the college experience at M.C.C., covering such topics as admissions requirements, costs and financial aid, student population, social life, and transferability. The others would describe in depth various related career and transfer programs. Each presentation would consist of professional narrations, photos, and recorded comments of college students presenting information that had been identified by the survey as having "high importance."

The cassette programs were to be distributed to all area high schools, local libraries, colleges, and many industries. Copies of the programs would also be available in various locations at the college to be used by current students as well as prospective students visiting the college. It was also decided that it was extremely important for the cassette programs to be updated periodically, just as an institution updates its college catalog.

During the creation of the Educational Prospectus at M.C.C., many institutions inquired about its status and become quite interested in developing a similar project. However, caution should be exercised by any college considering such a prospectus. First, the necessary commitment must be made. M.C.C. committed two years to this effort and was able to hire a full-time staff member with experience in graphics, writing, and photography through a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Commitments were made by the Insti-

tutional Research Department, as well as by various academic and student affairs offices to assist in the program. Each institution should make a commitment to develop an Educational Prospectus in order to give students the information they need to make the best choices possible. However, a prospectus using any medium that is developed with less than total support would probably present less than total information and not serve the intended purposes.

After M.C.C. reviewed the currently available information, it developed the following timetable in order to meet its objectives. A consideration of this timetable by interested institutions may help them consider whether they are prepared to provide "Better Information for Student Choice."

SUGGESTED TIMETABLE

September 1, first year	First phase of research to identify information needed by prospective students.
November 1, first year	Compiling research results, sharing data, and developing second questionnaire.
December 1, first year	Second phase of research to determine the answers of M.C.C. students to questions of prospective students.
February 1, first year	Compiling results.
March 1, first year	Writing, photographing, editing, and

	duplicating slide shows and printing brochures.
September 1, second year	Testing prospectus.
October 1, second year	Compiling responses to prospectus; evaluating effectiveness of prototype prospectus.
November 1, second year	Finishing prospectus; duplicating and distributing copies to previously identified sources.

It is not enough for the institution to simply take good photographs and develop copy on the basis of intuitive feelings. If a college is to project accurate information it must gather and utilize all institutional information available. Most colleges today boast of complex management information systems which produce massive amounts of data. It is time now to sift through this data and make the most relevant aspects available to students. This we have tried to do.

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